

Luke 3.1-6 Jesus is Coming—Prepare the Way!

Advent 2 [Year C]

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Are you anxious? I am. Every time I pull into that gravel driveway, I am anxious...anxious for our church to be put up. Anxious to have a place we can call our own. Anxious to have a single place to point people to and say, that is where we worship. Every time I pull in that drive I secretly hope that the foundation has been poured, or they delivered some materials for construction. But that wouldn't do any good would it. Let's face it. Even if they had all the material and all the construction vehicles out there tomorrow, they couldn't start building. You don't have to be a foreman to know that we can't build our church until the site work is complete. The land just isn't ready for a church; there are trees in the way; there is earth to be moved, and many other things need to be done before construction can begin. Our property needs to be prepared properly for construction.

Our hearts and minds are the same aren't they? They too need to be prepared. They need to be prepared for the LORD's salvation, to be looking towards his sacrifice, the salvation he has earned us.

And frankly, we aren't prepared. The path of our heart is not ready. Try as we may, we can't seem to get our hearts prepared the way that we need to. Because the path of our heart isn't level. It is filled with all sorts of spiritual ravines and valleys and mountains and hills. Our hearts are varied terrain.

Sometimes we go through spiritual valleys or ravines. Times where we cannot help, or so it seems, but wallow in our own self-pity. We look back at our past mistakes, our missteps, our misgivings and we dwell on them. Our hurtful words in a moment of anger. A broken relationship will can never mend. How can I ever make it right? We wish we could just go back and make it right and never make that mistake we regret so much. You try to fill that deep chasm of guilt with accomplishments, material things, empty relationships, alcohol, whatever. Anything to fill it. Then we realize we can't and we just dig ourselves deeper into guilt. Throwing ourselves a pity-party. Thinking if we just feel badly enough about what we have done that it will change things. Life in this valley is darkened by the shadows of guilt and filled with remorse. Life in this valley has you convinced that God couldn't even lift you up out of this dark place—even if he wanted to—and why would he want to? It seems like he never wanted to help you avoid all the problems in this life. This self-loathing threatens to blot out the light of the world, your faith in his love and his goodness.

But life wasn't always so dreary. And maybe right now things are going well for you. Maybe you are having one of your 'mountain' moments. Where you feel like nothing can stop you. A moment where you rest on the zenith of all you have accomplished in your life and look down with pride. Pride over all you have accomplished, pride over what you have achieved. Pride over how good your kids have turned out. Pride over how you have survived and conquered insurmountable odds. But really it is your pride that is insurmountable. Because no matter how much you have accomplished in this life; no matter how much stuff you can obtain; no matter how good your kids are—it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter because it inhibits your path from being made ready. You can't see God's path to salvation from the mountain or from the valley. The way is too far, it just doesn't seem worth getting to, so you comfort yourself with your own cheers or your own tears. The path of your heart is not ready.

Still others don't think they have really accomplished that much yet. And they don't think their life is that bad—but they still aren't ready. They aren't ready, because they haven't accomplished these mountain moments; they haven't even experienced the valleys. Their path gets so wrapped up in this life, in all the things that it can contain that it can't look beyond its next step. Have you ever walked like this? With your head facing down, looking at your feet. As you walk along you really have no idea where you are going, you are just following the previous step. This kind of path wanders and winds through life. A lot of us are caught in this kind of path, spiritually speaking. We know God is coming back and yet we also know we have stuff to do on this earth, things we want to accomplish in this life, so God and advancing his kingdom go back down to the bottom of our list of priorities. Back into the someday file. That is when our path becomes crooked and rough. We forget about where we are headed and we stray to one side or the other. At times life is so good we just want to stop and enjoy it, we wish we could tell God to wait a little longer. Other times, life isn't so good and we trip and stumble on the rough path we have chosen. Stumble on the rocks of situational ethics, trip on the fallen timber of just trying to get ahead.

Sometimes our life is a combination of all of those paths. We have had our deep ravines, moments where we thought we would never recover. We have had our mountain moments, where we thought no one could conquer us. And everything in between has been a winding path, filled with rough times of temptation, and tribulation to the point where we can't even really explain how we got to where we are. Our paths are individual to us, our spiritual topography unique. Sometimes we think they are so different that we couldn't possibly have anything in common with anyone else here.

But, water is the great equalizer. We have seen its effects here enough haven't we? Water erodes the high places and fills in the valleys. It cuts the straight path and smoothes out what was once rough. Water has equalized us. Water has leveled off, straightened, and smoothed our paths. The water of baptism has prepared your path.

In your baptism you were washed and cleansed and promised that your eternal salvation depends solely on what Christ did for you. Not on your valleys. Not on your mountains. Your crooked rough path is now made straight and smooth by this water—by this promise attached to his sacrifice.

Because this is what God did—he leveled off, he straightened, he smoothed the path of your heart. He sent his Son to be everything you weren't, to do what you could not.

For all those times where the guilt of your sins weighed you down, Christ came to lift that burden from your shoulder. To replace your heavy yoke of guilt and sin with his yoke, which is light. He came to lift you up out of your chasm, to bring you out of the depths of your misery—to look to him for everything you really need.

Christ also came to cut down your mountains to size. He demonstrated true humility for you and for your sins of pride. He did not consider the riches of his wealth, the accomplishments of his hands, the vastness of his intellect things which he could not set aside. Rather he set them aside; he humbled himself to be born of a virgin teenager; to be from lowly Nazareth; to be stricken, smitten and afflicted for all the times you beamed with sinful and selfish pride. Because he loved you.

God has straightened your path; showing himself to be the only thing you need in this world. Promising you that he would supply everything you really needed, just as he takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

Christ has also smoothed out your path, not by removing all the trials and tribulations of this world, but by lifting your eyes to look to him. So that you may see that the consequences of sin that we endure in this life are temporary. Enabling us to be content in every situation—no matter if our path is valleying or cresting—we look to our God, to what he has earned, in anticipation.

Even now our God does not leave us deal with frailty and foibles of our heart. He gives us his Comforter, his Holy Spirit to strengthen us in time of need. Our God gives us his Spirit to remind us during the rough spots, during our valley moments that our God loves us, and is working out everything for our good.

Isaiah and John the Baptist who quoted him thousands of years later, both tell us that all will see the salvation of the LORD. And everyone will on Judgment Day. But at that point, the site work must be done. On that day it will be clear what our God has won us through the blood of his only Son. But there are many who don't know. Many whose paths are unprepared for the way of the LORD. So God gives us his WORD so that we may carry out his plan, so that we can serve him in preparing more hearts, more paths for salvation. And the Holy Spirit serves us here as well. He gives us the words to say to others. He grants us his Word, his message of salvation for all kinds of situations. He gives us his Law to defend ourselves before the mountains and the crooked paths, so that we can call them to repentance. And he gives us his Gospel so that we may witness to valleys and the rough roads that we have a God of love and compassion.

Praise be to God that this is his nature. Love and compassion. He didn't wait for you or for me to fix ourselves, to do our own site work. Rather he sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts to prepare them and to point them to the Lamb of God who would offer his life as a ransom for many, who came to take away the sin of the world.